

# Cinémas Choisis

The selection of cinemas featured in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* magazine, 1930-1939, and its contribution to the characterization of the European cinema architecture.



This essay analyzes the cinemas that were featured in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* from 1930 until 1939. This being one of the most influential magazines for the spread of Modern Movement ideas, its editorial line focused on the adaptation of building to function and on the distinction between European and American cinemas. Theoretical texts separated classic live theatre from cinema design since programme and features were completely different. Far from American euphoria and classic theatre sobriety, how was architecture for cinema envisaged?

By Joana Gouveia Alves

*Est-ce à dire qu'une salle de cinéma n'est assimilable qu'à une épicerie? Presque. Mais, elle est une épicerie qui se doublerait d'une salle à manger; car c'est dans la salle de cinéma que se vend et se consomme le spectacle en conserve.*<sup>1</sup>

In the 30s European entrepreneurs were seduced by the scale and glamour of American cinemas, such as the Roxy, that often screened to full houses. However, due to the post WWI economic restraints, all they could build were poor replicas which were multiplied throughout Europe. In *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, all picture-palaces connected with the Hollywood's fantasies, such as Egyptian or Mediterranean atmospheres, were systematically excluded from publication. And yet, the construction system of these buildings was already avant-garde: metal framework, prefabricated components, concrete explored to the limits of its properties. As an illustration, the Rex Cinema (Paris, 1932), which was one of the first John Eberson's (1875–1954) atmospheric cinemas in Europe, had a 35-meter-span balcony without intermediary support sustained by an iron framework and incredible concrete foundations. In an article published in 1932,<sup>2</sup> photographs present the building under construction. The only photograph of Rex's interior decoration was later published, in 1933, along with Pierre Vago's (1910–2002) commentary "Rex was the first atmospheric cinema in Paris and we hope it to be the last".<sup>3</sup> When we compare *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* with its contemporary French magazine *La Construction Moderne*, it becomes evident that structure is highlighted while decorative apparatus is intentionally excluded.

The atmospheric theatre thus became a symbol of American frivolity. According to the editorial options, the only "good" American examples were Radio City Music Hall (The Associated Architects–Raymond Hood, Edward Durell Stone—for the Rockefeller Center Group,

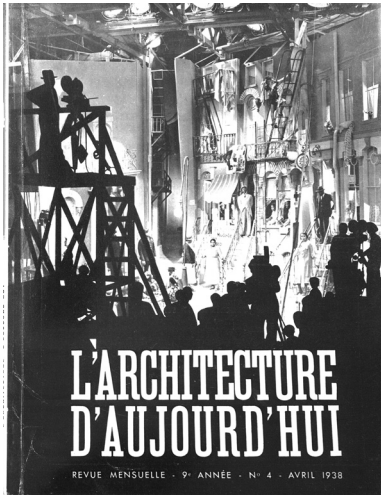
New York, 1932)<sup>4</sup> and the Earl Carol (Keiter and Balbonay, New York, 1932)<sup>5</sup>, being subject of two articles published in 1933. Further examples of American Movie Palaces were published in an exceptional article by Dexter Morand.<sup>6</sup> In this text, a sample of American and British cinemas illustrates his brief summary of their characteristics: cost-effective, large scaled (for thousands of patrons), opulent, overloaded decoration, exuberant lettering on the façades, a tower and a seductive pay booth on the sidewalk. Restaurant, bar, children playroom, car park and further facilities were indispensable. British cinemas were despised as they were considered to be cheap versions of American picture palaces. The only article on British cinemas is a two-page compilation of British cinema plans, published in 1936, without any text.<sup>7</sup>

Cinema architecture has always been criticized by modernist architects and critics, on both sides of the Atlantic, for its anachronism and eclecticism. The collage of overloaded settings, inspired in different ancient styles, in successive rooms in a same building seemed absurd. Even more because 'the seventh art' was considered an expression of modernity. It was not by chance that in order to launch the magazine, Pierre Chenal (Pseudonym used by Philippe Cohen, 1904–1990) was asked to do three short films about the new architecture: *Bâtir; Trois Chantiers; L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*.

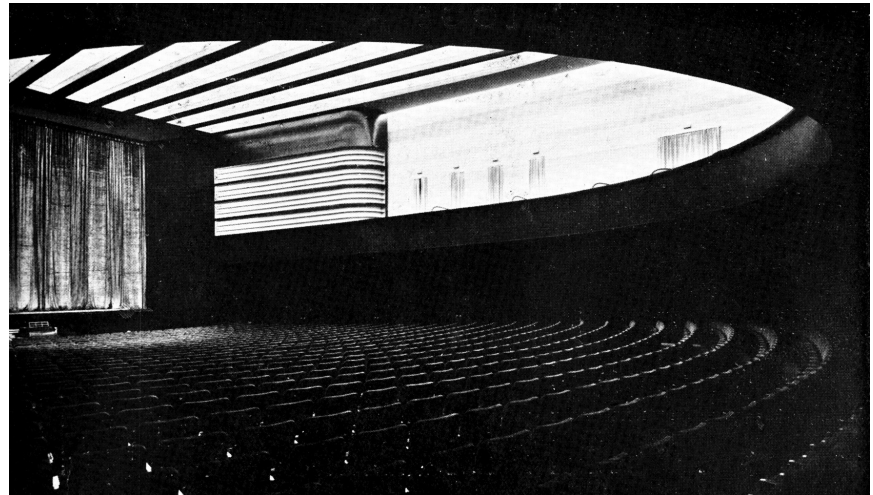
In Europe, architecture critics supported the development of new concepts in cinema design capable of reflecting the media's modernity. Julien Lepage supported this idea indirectly by criticizing the American examples. "Il n'a donc pas besoin de riches foyers et de couloirs (Gaumont). Il n'a pas besoin non plus d'un décor somptueux de la salle. Nos meilleurs cinémas (Raspail, Paris) n'offrent qu'une entrée-vestibule attrayante et une salle harmonieuse et tranquille, où tout décor est remplacé par des effets de lumière".<sup>8</sup> In brief, cinema architecture should follow function. This building type should dismiss all elements from theatre interior decoration such as curtains, boxes or proscenium arches that no longer made sense. All decorative elements should be thought to give prominence to the screen.

< Rudolf Fränkel, Lichtburg, Berlin, 1929. © Photo by Max Krajewski.<sup>10</sup>

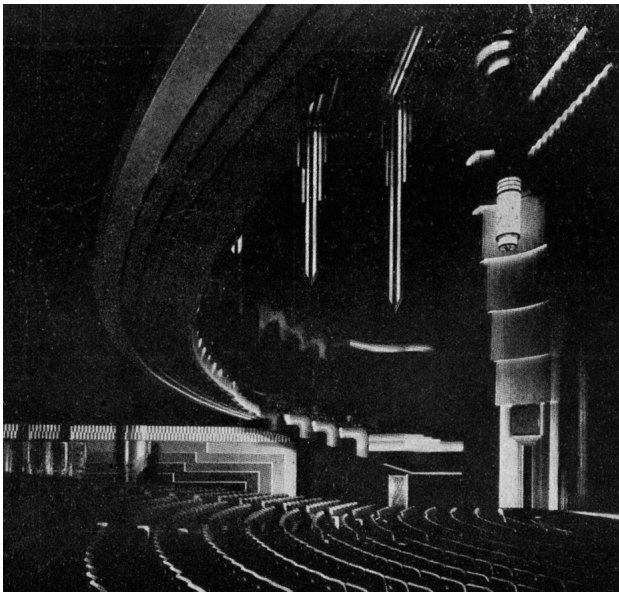




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The typology that best suited this concept was the newsreel cinema. Patrons watched short films from all over the world in continuous performance. Consequently, waiting rooms were pointless and emphasis was put on appealing features. Out of the 99 cinemas that were mentioned in the magazine between 1930 and 1939, 42 were built in France, about one-fifth was newsreel cinemas and the majority was designed by French architects. Cineac (Le Journal), Le Petit-Parisien and Paris-soir, Paris-midi, are newsreel cinemas associated with popular daily newspapers. Charles Siclis (1889–1942) and José Imbert designed cinemas with clear geometrical plans and auditoria with plain walls and exotic upholstered seats. Regarding the waiting walls and entrances, they played with dynamic stairs and corridors, indirect geometric lighting effects, neon signs and lettering. Pierre de Monteaut (1892–1974) and Adrienne Gorska (1899–

1969) developed the most coherent chain of this kind: the CINEAC.<sup>9</sup> They published at least ten of their newsreel cinemas and theoretical texts about their characteristics and what they called publicity architecture.

Also called *night architecture*, it named buildings that had an extravagant expression at night due to the lighting effects with colorful neon signs. This could be also achieved through the glazing façades so that passers-by could be seduced by glamorous ambiances. The *Métropole* in Brussels was given much attention, not only because of its important structural work in concrete but also because of its curved glazing façade. Another example is Rudolf Fränkel's (1901–1974) *Lichtburg Cinema* (Berlin, 1929) where a cylindrical tower works as a bright-lit beacon. Undeniably, the underlying principle had a strong American influence. The chain's name in bright characters helped to identify the building with the company which was associated with distinguishing features.

The editorial line praised cinemas from central and northern Europe particularly the designs of Fränkel and Uno Ahren (1897–1977). As Germany was suffering from

restrictive economic measures, theatres were designed, with a great economy of means, to reach remarkable effects with a minimum of decorative elements. They were often located in existing buildings such as housing and office blocks, circuses and theatres. German cinemas were referenced as state-of-the-art buildings, especially after the publication of Zucker's book *Lichtspielhauser und tonfilmtheater* in 1931.<sup>10</sup> A book review was later published in 1932.<sup>11</sup>

An important aspect focused on several articles was the surfaces' bareness. Ceilings were often decorated with indirect lighting lines directed to the screen. These lines were intended to sharpen perspective and put focus attention on the most important element: film. Absence of decoration highlighted geometry and proportion. Ceiling curves and parapets also gave away a dynamic perception of space.

*L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* had a doctrinaire approach to cinema construction. After all, cinemas were buildings devoted to a new technology. Reels came in tins which were served through a machine to an audience of consumers. As soon as this machine became obsolete, architecture followed. Among the cinemas we analysed and were able to locate, we realized that most of the free-standing cinemas had been demolished. The *Métropole*, as many others, was converted to retail space. Usually well ventilated spaces without natural light, conversions from cinema to night club, casino or bingo are recurrent. However,



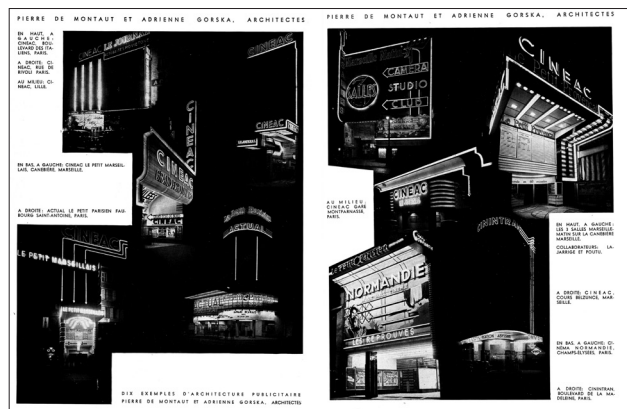
Figure 1. Cover of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, April 1938.

Figure 2. **Uno Ahren**, Flamman Cinema, Stockholm, 1929. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* n° 7, 1933.

Figures 3, 4. Radio City Hall by architects **Hood** and **Fouilhoux**, New York and Earl Carol by Architects **Keiter** and **Balbonay**, New York, 1932. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* n° 7, 1933.

Figure 5. **Bruno Elkouen**, Studio Raspail, Paris, 1932. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* n° 7, 1933.

Figure 6. Façades by **Pierre Monteaut** and **Adrienne Gorska**. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* n° 8, 1938, 38-39.



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er, most of the interior design has been destroyed. The Rex cinema is an exception to this: the big auditorium was kept with its atmospheric Mediterranean decoration, even if the services in the basement have not escaped being turned into a multiplex. Ironically, the best preserved cinemas are those now dedicated to live theatre performances.

#### Joana Gouveia Alves

(Coimbra, 1982) works at the Laboratory of History and Theory of Architecture (LTH2), *École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne* and is doing the IST-EPFL Joint Initiative Doctoral Programme. Previously, she studied architecture at the University of Coimbra and *École Nationale Supérieure de Paris-La Villette* (Erasmus) and worked as an architect at PMKJ Architects and Orange architecture in Coimbra. She is interested in the research fields of conservation and conversion of modernist buildings (in particular cinema theatres) and sustainability in architecture. During her studies she has always been interested in architectural theory: she wrote her final thesis about sustainable architecture theory and worked for *Nu* magazine (redactor and editor).

#### Notes

1. E. Mollo, P.D. Montaut, A. Gorska, "Salles de Cinéma", *AA* n° 9, 1938, 69.
2. Bluysen, Ebersson, "Nouveau Cinéma, à Paris Boulevard Poissonnière". *AA* n° 1, 1932, 39-45.
3. P. Vago, "Les Grands Cinémas Parisiens", *AA* n° 7, 1933, 31-35.
4. J.P., "Music-Hall International dans la Cité Rockefeller à New York", *AA*, n° 7, 1933, 67.
5. Anonymous, "Le Théâtre Earl Carrol à New-York, Arch. Keiter Babolnay", *AA* n° 7, 1933, 64.
6. D. Morand, "Le Cinéma en Angleterre et USA" *AA*, no. 7 (1933), 59-63.
7. Anonymous, "Plans comparatifs de quelques salles de cinéma en Angleterre". *AA* n° 2, 1936, 46-47.
8. J. Lepage, "Tendances actuelles dans la construction des salles de spectacles", *AA* n° 7, 1933, 3-5.
9. J.-J. Meusy, "CINEAC, Un concept, une architecture," *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* n° 66, 1997, 92-121.
10. Zucker, P., *Lichtspielhauser und tonfilmtheater*, Berlin, Verlag Ernest Wasmuth A.G., 1931.
11. J. Posener, "Cinemas et cinémas sonores", *AA* n° 5, 1932, 79.

#### References

All the articles concerning cinema published in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (*AA*) in the period 1930-1939.